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FEDERAL JUDICIARY SPACE

Progress Is Being Made To Improve The Long-Range Planning Process

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FEDERAL JUDICIARY SPACE:
PROGRESS IS BEING MADE TO IMPROVE
THE LONG-RANGE PLANNING PROCESS

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY
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In September 1993, GAO issued a report, Federal Judiciary Space: Long-Range Planning Process Needs Revision (GAO/GGD-93-132, Sept. 28, 1993), which evaluated the reasonableness of the judiciary's process for projecting long-range space needs. By establishing a long-range planning process, the judiciary became one of the first federal government organizations to develop a mechanism for anticipating space needs. The results of the planning process are used by the General Services Administration to develop requests to Congress for new construction and expansion of court space in existing facilities.

The GAO report identified three key problems that impaired the accuracy of the judiciary's space projections: (1) all judicial districts were not treated consistently, (2) existing space plus unmet needs was accepted as a baseline without questioning whether it was appropriate given a district's current caseload, and (3) projection methods were not statistically acceptable and involved a high level of subjectivity. GAO made six specific recommendations to correct these problems.

In March 1994, GAO was asked by the House Public Works Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds to assess the judiciary's actions to implement the recommendations in GAO's report. GAO found that the judiciary has made progress in improving its long-range planning process.

The judiciary has implemented two of the recommendations--one relating to the consistency of the process and the other relating to the time span covered by the projections. The judiciary has partially responded to two other recommendations dealing with the projection methods and the level of subjectivity in the process. The judiciary has not implemented the two remaining recommendations--improving the method for grouping districts and establishing appropriate baselines. Judiciary officials said they are evaluating options for further action to fully address these recommendations.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We welcome this opportunity to discuss the status of the judiciary's response to GAO's recommendations for improving the judiciary's long-range space planning process. In September 1993, we issued a report, Federal Judiciary Space: Long-Range Planning Process Needs Revision (GAO/GGD-93-132, Sept. 28, 1993), which evaluated the reasonableness of the judiciary's process for projecting long-range space needs. The judiciary was one of the first federal government organizations to develop a planning process for anticipating long-range space needs. The results of the planning process are used by the General Services Administration (GSA) to develop requests to Congress for new construction and expansion of court space in existing facilities.

In 1988, to anticipate future space requirements, the Judicial Conference of the United States, the policymaking body of the judiciary, directed each of the 94 district courts to develop a long-range plan for its space needs. It also directed the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AOC), the administrative body of the judiciary, to provide the districts with the necessary planning guidance. The basic assumption of the planning process was that caseloads should determine staff needs, which in effect should define space needs.

Our report identified three key problems that impaired the accuracy of the judiciary's projections of space needs: (1) all judicial districts were not treated consistently, (2) existing space plus unmet needs for authorized staff was accepted as a baseline without questioning whether it was appropriate given a district's current caseload, and (3) projection methods were not statistically acceptable and involved a high level of subjectivity. We made six specific recommendations in our report to correct these key problems.

In March 1994, we were asked by the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, Committee on Public Works and Transportation, House of Representatives, to assess the judiciary's actions to implement the recommendations in our report. To respond to this request, we interviewed judiciary and GSA officials, examined documents relating to the judiciary's long-range planning process, and discussed alternative statistical methodologies with judiciary officials. Overall, we found that the judiciary has made progress in improving its long-range planning process.

The judiciary has implemented two of our recommendations--one relating to the consistency of the process and the other relating to the time span covered by the projections. The judiciary has partially responded to two other recommendations dealing with the projection methods and the level of subjectivity and has indicated a willingness to take further actions to fully implement these recommendations. The judiciary has not

implemented the two remaining recommendations--improving the method of grouping districts and establishing appropriate baselines (current space needs). Judiciary officials told us that they are evaluating options to address these two remaining recommendations. I will now briefly explain the judiciary's actions on our report recommendations to the Director of AOC, the office responsible for managing the planning process.

IMPLEMENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommendation: To improve consistency in the long-range planning process, AOC should prepare updated space plans for all districts whenever changes are made to the assumptions that affect staff/space allocations

In our report, we expressed concern that the districts whose space plans were completed early in the process received lower space allocations than did those completed later. AOC is now updating the long-range plans and intends to update all plans within about 2 years of their original completion date. AOC has completed the updating process for 15 districts, and the process is underway for another 15. The first round of updates will be completed by 1996 if AOC follows its planned biennial schedule.

GAO recommendation: To improve the reliability of the long-range planning process, AOC should limit the time span covered by the space projections to 10 years

In our report, we stated that (1) 20- and 30-year projections lack precision and (2) GSA uses only the 10-year space estimates for its planning purposes. Since our original evaluation, AOC has changed the information given to GSA for plan development. Now, whenever a decision is made to proceed on a particular building project, AOC provides GSA with detailed 10-year space requirements for prospectus development and an overall summary of needs at the 30-year point for purposes of site planning.

PARTIALLY IMPLEMENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommendation: To improve the statistical reliability of the future space needs, AOC should identify and use a standard statistical technique that would generate accurate caseload projections with defined confidence intervals

AOC officials told us they no longer average the results generated from the regression equations used to derive caseload estimates and no longer apply arbitrary multipliers to the results. AOC officials told us they have adopted the statistical method we used to make the estimates that appeared in our report. While we are encouraged by this action, we suggested--both in our report and in our discussions with AOC officials--alternative methods that could yield results with narrower confidence intervals--a statistical measure indicating the accuracy of the

projections. AOC officials said they plan to test alternative projection methods. This task is of prime importance for the overall planning process because accurate caseload projections are necessary if accurate staff needs are to be estimated.

GAO recommendation: To further improve the reliability of the estimates of future space needs, AOC should reduce the subjectivity of the process by eliminating the use of arbitrarily selected regression models and by verifying the information provided by the local representatives

AOC officials told us they have improved the reliability involved in projecting caseloads by eliminating the subjectivity in choosing regression models. AOC officials informed us how they now use a defined and consistent projection methodology for all districts. However, subjectivity still occurs when local representatives change the estimates of staff requirements that were generated from caseload projections. AOC officials said they will begin comparing the information provided by the local representatives to the information from the statistical projections to determine the reasonableness of the staffing estimates.

RECOMMENDATIONS NOT YET FULLY ADDRESSED

GAO recommendation: To improve consistency in the planning process, AOC should devise a method for classifying districts that considers case complexity in addition to caseload

AOC officials have not changed the method by which they classify each of the 94 districts into 1 of 4 groups--what the judiciary calls growth models--which are used to establish the ratios for converting caseloads into staff needs. We discussed with AOC a statistical method known as cluster analysis, which could be used to develop groups of districts that would allow for the use of multiple factors, such as case complexity, rather than using only total caseload. AOC officials said that they are evaluating several alternatives for classifying districts. This task is crucial for planning purposes because the average current caseload within each group determines the relationship between caseloads and numbers of key personnel required.

GAO recommendation: To determine whether existing space plus unmet needs was the appropriate baseline in light of current caseloads, AOC should revise the process to require that baselines be established that reflected AOC's assumptions regarding the relationships between caseloads, staff needs, and space requirements

AOC has not yet addressed this recommendation. However, it has developed and implemented an automated system, called ANYCOURT, which is used to determine future space needs by converting estimated staff needs to space needs. AOC officials told us that

the space requirements generated by ANYCOURT are approximately 20-percent higher than those produced under the process they previously used. AOC officials said they are seeking to identify the reasons for this increase. While we did not evaluate the space allocations in ANYCOURT, in principle such a system could be designed to eliminate the subjectivity involved when AOC identifies current space needs.

In summary, the judiciary has made progress in improving its long-range planning process. Judiciary officials indicated that they plan to take the necessary actions to address our remaining concerns, and we have offered to assist them in any way possible. The changes already implemented combined with our other recommended actions should correct the problems discussed in our report. We believe, however, that the combined effects of the changes cannot be assessed until they have been implemented for at least 6 months.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. My colleagues and I will be pleased to answer any questions.

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